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BÊCHE-DE-MER, ABORIGINES AND AUSTRALIAN HISTORY

Crosbie Morrison Memorial Lecture

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Matthew Flinders wrote a brief, but dramatic note to Sir Joseph Banks, early in 1803.

> 'In the gulph [of Carpentaria] we had met with many marks of former visitors, though none recent; and as these could not be the French ships [of Baudin], we were very desirous to learn whom they could be and what was their business. At Cape Arnhem our desire was gratified; they were Malays from Macassar.'

On 17 February, in what he termed Malay Roads, in the English Company Islands, Flinders had encountered six vessels. Believing them to be piratical, he approached warily, but found with relief that they were part of a fleet of 60 praus, which had sailed from Macassar on a bêche-de-mer collecting voyage. With characteristic thoroughness, he recorded the information told him by the Macassans, and checked it the following month with the Governor of Timor. His artist, William Westall, added vivid detail with his sketches.

Already, I have used unfamiliar terms requiring definition: bêche-de-mer, praus, Malayans, Macassar. Here is a field where natural history, technology, history, geography and anthropology combine. It is an important subject for research and a field rich in humanity. My intention is to sketch some of its ramifications and to give an interim report on recent archaeological fieldwork in Arnhem Land. Crosbie Morrison, who contributed at least ten articles on Aborigines to *Wild Life*, would have been well equipped to interpret this complex theme, involving Man and Nature on north Australian shores.

To date, anthropologists seeking a deeper understanding of aboriginal Arnhemlanders, have commented on certain aspects of the bêche-de-mer industry; historians have largely ignored a theme of Australian history which is truly international.

In search of definitions, let us return to Malay Roads, in February 1803. With Flinders's Javanese cook acting as interpreter, Flinders learned from Pobasso, commander of the squadron, that they had sailed in December, out of Macassar, chief harbour of Celebes. The north-west monsoon blew them to Arnhem Land. By May or June, when they would return to Celebes with the south-east trade winds, the 1,000 or more men manning the 60 praus would have collected bêche-de-mer along the entire Arnhem Land coast, and down the Gulf of Carpentaria. Each prau would be laden with some 100,000 specimens, on this estimate, representing a total harvest of some 6,000,000 animals; and they would return the following December.

These Malays, as Flinders and most nineteenth century writers called them, were in reality natives of the south-western limb of Celebes, and their chief port was Macassar. In the seventeenth century, the native Macassans had resisted Dutch penetration, and the Bugis of Boni, peopling an area adjacent to Macassar, profited

by their action. The Bugis allied with the Dutch, who ultimately prevailed, and after 1672 the Princes of Boni were given favoured treatment by the victorious Dutch, and the port of Macassar became their chief base; their praus sailed with official Dutch permits. Pobasso's fleet was controlled by the Rajah of Boni.

It is not surprising that Flinders termed these Bugis, Malayan. For indeed, the Bugis traders were strongly based in Malayan states, as in every harbour of south-east Asia, and they fired the enthusiasm of Western commercial entrepreneurs.

One of them, G. W. Earl, wrote in the 1830's that

> 'the commercial enterprise of these modern Phoenicians is unequalled in any part of the world; every soul, male or female, from the prince to the peasant, being more or less engaged in trade, and their adventurous spirit induces them to undertake the most arduous voyages in vessels very ill adapted to brave the perils of the ocean. They are the chief and almost the sole carriers of the archipelago.'

Prau is the general term used to describe Bugis watercraft: wooden sailing vessels with large, oblong, fibre matting sails. To judge from Westall's sketches, those seen by Flinders were actually *pajalas*: smaller praus, with low sterns and tripod masts. He estimated their weight at 25 tons, but this may have been generous; 10 to 20 tons is a more likely range. *Palari*: the name of the larger, high-sterned Bugis praus, are believed to be an adaptation of the local pajalas design, to which was added the stern and bowsprit of sixteenth century Portuguese vessels. Praus of this type were frequent visitors to Australia. Praus were numerous. For example, in 1849, 800 of them visited Singapore, while in 1841, crews totalling 5,000 men visited Dobbu, in the Aru Islands. In the early 1930's, 8,000 praus of all sizes cleared the port of Macassar.

Constructed entirely of wood and bamboo, with bamboo slats as decking, and equipped with two large steering oars, they looked unwieldy craft. But they were quite seaworthy, and Alfred Russel Wallace, who travelled extensively on them during the 1850's, claimed them as the most comfortable transport afloat. He once travelled from Dobbu to Macassar (over 1,000 miles) in under ten days; it is interesting that his Macassan servant had visited Australia on several occasions.

Navigation was elementary, for Dutch compasses and charts were rare, and seldom used. The Bugis relied on the experience of years of sailing the same routes, of coasting whenever practical, and trusting in the reliability of north-west monsoons and south-east trades for making landfalls. Speeds of 5 knots could be maintained for days; on the Australian route, it was possible to reach Melville Island or the Cobourg Peninsula within ten to fifteen days, with the final stretch of three or four days without sight of land.

So much for the men and boats which Flinders encountered. The object of their voyage was bêche-de-mer, a French derivation from the Portuguese Bicho-do-mar, or sea-worm. The Bugis and the Dutch called it trepang, the colloquial name adopted throughout the Pacific, and followed here. Trepang, a member of the Class Holothurioidea, belongs systematically to the invertebrate sub-kingdom of Echinodermata. The term, sea-cucumber, aptly describes those species which were commercially exploited. The trepang ranges in size from a few inches to three feet in length; its diet consists of calcareous-shelled Foraminifera, and it frequents shallow tropical waters, particularly the muddy or sandy bottoms around the coast of northern Australia.

Soup, made from the dried body wall of certain species of sea-cucumbers, is an important item of Chinese diet. At Canton during the last century, thirty varieties

or grades of trepang were traded. Indeed, many late eighteenth century English voyagers in the Dutch East Indies commented upon the volume of this trade, particularly from Borneo, the Pater Noster Islands, Aru and Celebes. Around 1820, trepang was said to be the largest Chinese import from the Indonesian area; from Macassar alone, almost 500 tons of dried trepang was exported annually. A contemporary commented that 'the fishery of the tripang is to China what that of the sardine, tunny and anchovy is to Europe'. But it was a Chinese delicacy only. The aborigines never ate it, and Europeans rarely. When A. R. Wallace was offered trepang during his Aru visit in 1857, he refused a food 'looking like sausages which have been rolled in mud and then thrown up the chimney'.

The trepang was either collected by hand, speared or trawled. In all cases, the Bugis employed dugout canoes, termed 'lepa-lepa', several of which were carried on each prau. (Four praus were once observed with nineteen canoes as tenders.) The Arnhem Land canoe—'lippa-lippa'—is a direct imitation of these dugouts. To judge from literary sources, it would appear that the aborigines bartered, or captured, many canoes from the Macassan fishers, possibly constructing their own craft with metal tools from the earlier nineteenth century, when demand exceeded supply.

On land, the trepang was boiled in iron vats of about fifteen gallons' capacity, brought on the praus. It was then cleaned and boiled again in a tan of mangrove bark. Subsequently it was dried, then smoked in bamboo and rattan sheds erected for the purpose. The entire process within any bay might take from two to three weeks.

Numerous early explorers described this industry. All agreed that the Bugis came from Macassar, or islands off Southern Celebes. However, others came also from the Bugis community on Sumbawa, which in 1850 constituted ten per cent of the island's 75,000 inhabitants. They congregated annually near Timor, and came across to Melville Island from its eastern end. From here they split into groups of five or six and worked eastwards to Carpentaria. At the season's end they re-assembled at Port Essington or other harbours, and returned. On occasion, fleets took the more hazardous and longer crossing from western Timor and Rottee Island to Port Keats and ports south. In 1802 the French explorer Freycinet met 26 praus at Cape Londonderry, in the Kimberleys. The most southerly contact, noted by Stokes of *Beagle*, was broken pottery, lying on the beach near North-West Cape, lat. 20°S. In Carpentaria, contact extended as far as the Wellesley Islands, but normally only to the Pellew group. It is unlikely that Torres Strait was visited regularly, because distance travelled was related to the duration of the monsoonal season.

Let us now consider the material traces of this contact. We are fortunate that Alfred Searcey, Sub-Collector of Customs in Darwin from 1882 to 1896, has left a description of his experiences while collecting taxes from the Macassans in territorial waters. Searcey's accounts are as colourful as his personality, but they are accurate to a degree. I found his rough map of Macassan trepang camps invaluable this year, while searching for possible excavation sites.

Let us visit Entrance Island, at the mouth of the Liverpool River, on his small steam launch in 1882.

> 'The Malays call it Lee Monie Monie, and it was a favourite camping place with them . . . we pulled to a lovely sandy beach, carrying deep water right in. Where we landed there had been a Malay camping place. The fireplaces were there, the remains of smokehouses, and near at hand great stacks of timber all ready for use.'
> (Searcey appropriated this mangrove wood for his boat's furnace.)

The material traces of this occupation are evident today in the form of ash, broken potsherds and numerous square gin bottle fragments. Excavation showed that the deposit is up to eleven inches deep. A solitary tree of *Tamarindus indicus*, the Macassan botanical marker, is growing there. The astringent fruit of this plant was eaten by the Macassans, and so propagated accidentally around the coast. Real forests of tamarinds now thrive in the Port Keats area, while they provide welcome shade for the Milingimbi Methodist Mission.

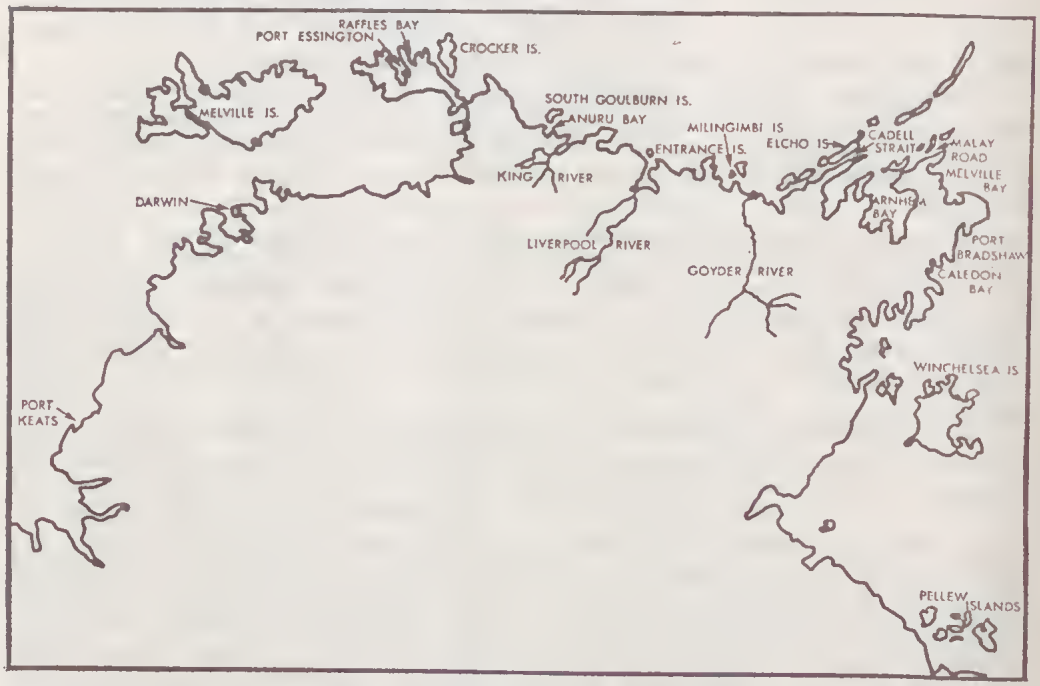

FIG. 1

Earlier, between South Goulburn Island and the mainland, Searcey located 'two proas at anchor in a nice and apparently well-sheltered bay'. This I believe was Anuru Bay, an archaeological site of the utmost interest, for it allows us to reconstruct the operations of a large industrial site. The essential prerequisites for Macassan interest are there: a shelving sandy beach, deep water, and mangrove fuel supply nearby. A tamarind tree and fourteen rows of stones which served as the bases upon which the iron pots were stood, testify to Macassan occupation. Hollows in the sand mark sites where smokehouses with bamboo walls were erected —the fire was lit in the hole, to avoid burning the walls. A level camp area and a small well, stand about 100 yards away from the main industrial complex. The whole area is littered with broken potsherds, most of them the texture and colour of flowerpots, but including some Chinese porcelain.

Searcey was told that this was a new camp, 'the one they had been in the habit of using having been washed away'. If this is a valid identification, everything on it post-dates 1880. The old site to which Searcey referred is a sandbank off South Goulburn Island, now only exposed at very low tide, where many hundreds of potsherds have been collected by Professor R. M. Berndt.

It became easy to 'spot' potential sites. Tamarind trees, deep water and sandy beaches which offered protection from the north-west monsoon, adjacent drinking water and ready supplies of mangrove wood—all these are clues for the searcher. Experience suggests a further basic requirement—defence. All the major sites are situated on islands, promontories, or areas offering an unobstructed view of the hinterland. It suffices here to state that those Macassan camps visited during my survey were fleeting affairs; and it is evident that relations with aborigines were frequently warlike. In six major sources written between 1818 and 1850, this is emphasized by phrases such as 'perpetual warfare', 'great fear', 'fortifications'. Stokes reported that in the late 1830's, every second man was armed, while his mate worked.

Time precludes me from entering many of the byways of this topic, upon which I hope to research more fully. It is necessary to touch briefly on four problems.

1. When did the Macassans first come?
2. What was their impact on aboriginal society?
3. What was their significance for European period history?
4. What was the nature of the economics of the trepang industry?

We know when the contact ceased—it was in 1907, under terms of the Immigration Restriction Act. However, it must have continued sporadically. There are still a few old aboriginal men alive who worked on the praus. At Elcho Island this September, a man drew me a crayon sketch of a prau, complete with bamboo cabin, tripod mast and dugout canoes. This man is thought to have been born around 1895, and he would have been possibly too young to have sailed as a crew member in 1907.

Flinders was told that the Australian industry began 20 years before 1803, after praus were blown to Australia from the Rottee trepang field. This seems a likely story of the origins of the industry, though the chronology needs substantiation. However, anthropologists believe that a much longer period is necessary to account for the numerous Macassan linguistic, ceremonial, artistic and cultural influences on Arnhem Land society. Ronald and Catherine Berndt, who have written more on this subject than anyone, suggest a date in the sixteenth or seventeenth centuries as the minimum requirement.

The pottery on the trepang sites may provide the vital clue, but so far it remains virtually unstudied. I collected 1,100 pieces on six sites this year; hundreds had already been collected on Winchelsea Island and at Port Bradshaw in the 1940's. On the sandbank at Goulburn Island, Berndt has collected many hundreds more, in addition to the 400 collected by myself. Some of the porcelain has been tentatively dated as South-East Asian mainland ware of the seventeenth century, but this remains to be confirmed. The fact is, that present knowledge of historic pottery ware of the region is inadequate.

Of great interest are the square gin or arrack bottles, so common on all sites. These appear to be mainly of Dutch origin, and some offer obvious chances of close dating, for the manufacturer's trade mark is preserved.

At Elcho Island, on a trepang camp site visited by Searcey in 1882, three Dutch coins have been found by the Methodist Mission authorities. Two are dated 1790, while the third is 1838; incidentally, close in time to Flinders's date of 1783. There are two other intriguing clues. One is a piece of Ming porcelain of fifteenth or early sixteenth century origin found on Groote Eylandt in 1948. The other is the soapstone figurine of a Chinese Taoist immortal, Shou Lao, also dating from around the fifteenth century. It was found embedded in a banyan tree in Darwin in 1879, and its authenticity seems assured.

Until further fieldwork and pottery studies have been completed, it is rash to offer more than these two observations. It is well known that the Chinese were active in Timor and elsewhere in Indonesia during the fifteenth century. These finds may be related to this exploration phase, and therefore unconnected with Macassan enterprise. My own impression is that the camp sites which I visited were superficial in deposit, and there is an apparent identity of pottery design, shape and colour, on all sites, including those Carpentaria region sites described by Berndt and others in the 1940's. The surface indications are unfavourable to a long period of occupation. As an archaeologist interested in matters of antiquity, I hope that my first impressions prove wrong.

Berndt, Donald Thomson and other anthropologists have demonstrated convincingly that during the Macassan era, there were complex influences on aboriginal society which made a fundamental contribution to art, mythology, ceremonial, material culture and language of Arnhem Land. I must refer you to their work, without elaboration here.

I have mentioned liquor bottles as being ubiquitous on all camp sites. It is significant that in the 1930's, Professor Thomson found that a replica of such square-faced bottles had been elevated to the level of a ceremonial totem in the Glyde River area, while the small figures painted around the centre of the totem were trepang. This is a most important piece of documentation, because it indicated the extent to which overseas influences permeated aboriginal thinking. The object was foreign, trepang was not an edible commodity in aboriginal economy; yet glass and its source had been integrated into aboriginal society.

Today, old aborigines reminisce wistfully about the 'good old days' of Macassan contact. It was not always so. Without elaborating the evidence here, nineteenth century Macassans were wary of the aborigines, although they employed them as labourers and bartered with them. And there were severe reprisals from Macassans on occasion, while many disputes were centred around aboriginal women.

Despite constant tension, many aborigines were taken to Macassar. In 1829, four Carpentaria natives went on the one prau; in the 1840's it was a matter frequently commented upon by visitors to Port Essington. In 1878, Captain Cadell wrote from Macassar to the South Australian Government that 'numerous aboriginal Australians are to be found in Macassar as hewers of wood and drawers of water, but the authorities object to their joining the vessels of their fellow subjects'. Yet many aborigines did return to Arnhem Land, and the influence which their experience exerted is intriguing but immeasurable.

It is my contention that a deep knowledge of the trepang industry is the prerequisite to the understanding of the early history of colonization in tropical Australia; but its ramifications extend further than that. Here I would make a plea to historians of the south-east Asian region between 1750 and 1850, to leave those dreary wastes of Colonial Records and direct their attention to humbler sources, the better to comprehend the human populations involved. I believe that intensive study would establish that the Macassans never 'occupied' the northern coastline. Their visits were nomadic, only remaining two or three weeks in a locality before moving on. Except for the stonework erected under their boilers, and the wells sunk for water, they left no permanent structures. They brought their canoes and trepanging gear with them; their huts, smokehouses, drying racks, and roofing were all bamboo, matting, and rattan prefabrications brought on the praus. Unless thin section studies of the pottery prove to the contrary, I cannot accept Berndt's interpretation, based upon native traditions, that pottery was made in Arnhem Land from termite nest clay. The pottery is too well turned and fired;

there is no indication of kilns, wasters, and so on; the Macassans were fully occupied with more gainful activities; there are some indications that pottery was supplied from Celebes and the Kai Islands.

I have said that their sites were placed on islands and other protected areas; they did not penetrate beyond the mangrove fringes. There is documentary evidence of their situation. In 1828, a small Macassan fleet called at the British Colony at Raffles Bay, where they requested British protection. Of the several writers who testify to this, one commented:

> 'they found themselves protected from the Indians, and were able to repair their vessels without being molested by them. Previous to our occupation . . . they were accustomed to resort for these purposes to a small island outside'.

With official encouragement, they departed, promising to return and settle there, next season. In 1829 they arrived with wives, children and trade goods, to find the settlement abandoned by the British.

In late 1838 Port Essington was founded. During March 1839, praus arrived in the harbour. Captain Stokes, of *Beagle*, records:

> 'their owners solicited permission to erect their establishments for curing trepang under the protection of the British flag. This being granted, they made choice of a spot on the beach, and a little subsidiary settlement soon sprang up. Being now for the first time secure from the attacks of the natives, . . . they expected to pursue their occupation with far greater advantage to themselves'.

It is interesting to reflect, that the preservation of the Northern Territory as an area of exclusively white colonial enterprise, is perhaps due to the activities of its aboriginal inhabitants.

Between 1824 and 1849 there were three attempts to colonize the North: Melville Island, Raffles Bay and Port Essington. Their foundation and abandonment needs detailed study by historians. It should reveal changing imperial designs. Common to all of them, however, is an obsession with Bugis enterprise in Australia and the far east of the present Indonesian area, centred on the Aru Islands and Ceram. There is, for example, a close link between the activities of Raffles and his supporters, and propaganda about this region. Eulogies about Bugis traders who 'have scattered our manufactures over the whole of the Achipelago', must be interpreted in the knowledge of Dutch trade monopoly, Raffles's deliberate advocacy of Bugis independence, and desire for an easterly British counterpart to Singapore, founded 1819.

So it was, that propaganda for the first settlement in 1823 claimed that the Macassan trepang praus were of a 100 tons burthen and made a £180,000 harvest each year. It was with such optimism and faulty data that Britain entered the area. It explains why the rather miserable crews were welcomed, and why similar propanganda accompanied the Port Essington venture. But because of changing concepts of the imperial idea, during the second part of the century, sea-slugs and British imperialism ceased to be a synonymous interest. The South Australian government went to considerable trouble to discourage the Macassans. Cadell, at Macassar in 1878, penned thoughts totally at variance with the early acceptance of the Bugis. He viewed

> 'with a strong sense of shame and injustice the departure of a fleet of "slavey allies" to shores that ought to be held sacred for the "sons of the soil" and the policy of the government of a free Colony of Great Britain that persistently ignores British rights in favour of the compulsory labour of the alien and

knowingly sacrifices British interests to the agrandisement of the Asiatic bondholder'.

In 1882 the South Australian government introduced economic measures to terminate the trade.

Was trepanging a viable industry? Whenever it began, Flinders witnessed the industry at its peak. I have collected data from all sources known to me, and consider the 60 praus claimed by Flinders to be the maximum number engaged in the trade. After 1850, the number may be fewer than 25. I suspect that during this latter period, the size of craft decreased also. It still remains, that upwards of 1,000 or 1,200 men may have been engaged in the industry in the earlier nineteenth century.

Fortunes of the industry must have been greatly affected by erratic fluctuations in the Chinese price of trepang. 1822 and 1887 were years when the price arbitrarily halved, for reasons unknown to me. In any case, price per picul (133 lb) ranged between 5 and 70 dollars, depending upon the grade. Australian trepang was not of first quality, and an 1820 source ranks it sixth of the thirty grades.

Australian trepang travelled farther than any other Bugis trepang, and I suspect that keeping it dry and free from decay may have imposed great problems—it was all redried at the end of the season, before leaving the Cobourg Peninsula. Melanesian and Queensland trepanging, based on European control, may have represented serious competition in the later part of the century, for the trepang there was of preferred quality.

It was a hazardous industry. Literature abounds with records of wrecks, particularly on Melville Island, and massacres of crews by aborigines. In 1847 four praus were wrecked, while in 1890 three out of thirteen were lost. Then there were pirates, who cruised on the shipping lane north of Timor and off Flores. Three praus were captured by pirates in one year, around 1840.

To these hazards, in the 1880's, the South Australian government added duties on trade goods bartered to aborigines, and a licence to fish. Searcey's thumb was the deciding rule in tax levy. In 1890, total taxes collected from praus averaging 16 tons, ranged from £37 to £62 (possibly a tax of 7% on the value of the cargo). The following year, rice tax rose by ½d lb and grog was taxed. In the same year, Queensland trepang captains of vessels of comparable size paid only £6 tax.

Two legal documents dating from the 1850's and 1880's establish that captains and crews were even more unfortunate. The Macassan praus were owned by a small group of Chinese merchants in Macassar, and these documents are their contracts with captains on the Australian trade (three men owned most of the 1878 fleet).

Suffice it to say that the owner received a third of the profits and a brokerage commission on the remainder of the cargo, for selling it. He advanced loans to captain and crew for their food and equipment. These advances were normally greater than the total possible profit, and a clause forbade a crew member to leave his employment until debts were paid. Cadell met one man in 1878 who had 25 years' crew service, and was still 100 rupees in debt. If there was no profit, everybody shared the loss.

Given a profit, after repayment of all advances to the captain, the balance was shared in the proportion of three to captain and one to crew. Crew size averaged thirty, and therefore the greatest expectation of a crew member would be a return of less than one per cent of any profit; there were further daunting limiting conditions in the contract. Australia's earliest international trade was not her most successful venture. It seems probable, however, that the aborigines derived more

benefit from it than the prau crews engaged in it. The balance of payments lay in their favour.

A Note on some of the Chief Sources

Flinders's letter to Banks is in the correspondence of R. Brown, British Museum Ms. 32,439, p. 82.

Cadell's letter to the Minister of Education is in the South Australian Archives, No. 83, 1879.

The most extensive modern discussion of the subject is R. M. and C. H. Berndt, *Arnhem Land*, Melbourne 1954, which includes a useful bibliography; see also, the article by R. M. Berndt in *Hemisphere*, March 1965. Additional anthropological material is provided in D. F. Thomson, *Economic Structure and the Ceremonial Exchange Cycle in Arnhem Land*, Melbourne 1949. The most reliable of A. Searcey's books is *In Australian Tropics*, London 1907.

Of the explorers, the journals of M. Flinders (1814), P. P. King (1827), J. L. Stokes (1846) and J. B. Jukes (1847) are outstanding. For the organization of the industry in Indonesia, see J. Crawfurd, *The History of the Indian Archipelago*, 3 vols., Edinburgh 1820. For similar material, and for propaganda for the colonization of northern Australia, the numerous publications of G. W. Earl are essential. Especially consult his *The Eastern Seas*, London 1837, and *Handbook for Colonists in Tropical Australia*, London 1882 (1863). G. E. P. Collins, *East Monsoon*, New York 1937 provides discursive details concerning Macassan praus; see also A. R. Wallace, *The Malay Archipelago*, London 1869. W. Saville-Kent, *The Great Barrier Reef of Australia*, London 1893, described the *Holothuridae* and the Queensland trepang industry.